

Prime Minister Andrus Ansip of the Reform Party stepped down in March to allow for the rise of a new Reform Party leader ahead of 2015 parliamentary elections. A new coalition government headed by Reform's Taavi Rõivas was quickly approved. Prime Minister Rõivas abandoned Reform's previous coalition partner, the Union of Pro Patria and Res Publica (IRL), to form an alliance with the Social Democrats.

In October, Estonia's parliament narrowly approved a measure that legalized civil unions for same-sex partners.

The Russian annexation of Crimea and ongoing crisis in Ukraine raised tensions in Estonia about the potential for Russian expansionism. Russian president Vladimir Putin's assertion that Russia was entitled to act to protect Russian-speakers in Ukraine caused particular alarm in Estonia, which has a significant minority population of ethnic Russians who speak Russian as their primary language. Tensions between Estonia and Russia spiked in September, days after U.S. president Barack Obama announced that the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) would step up its presence in the Balkan region. Estonian officials claimed that Russian forces had abducted an Estonian security officer within Estonian borders, while Russian officials asserted that the security officer was detained after crossing the border into Russia. The Estonian officer, Eston Kohver, was charged by Russia with spying and faces as much as 20 years in prison.

Political Rights and Civil Liberties:

### **Political Rights: 39 / 40 [Key]**

#### **A. Electoral Process: 12 / 12**

The 1992 constitution established a 101-seat, unicameral Riigikogu, whose members are elected for four-year terms. A prime minister, chosen by the president and confirmed by the parliament, serves as head of government. The president is elected by parliamentary ballot to a five-year term, filling the largely ceremonial role of head of state. Independent observers have deemed recent elections free and fair.

In parliamentary elections held in March 2011, the Reform Party won 33 seats, with its coalition partner, the IRL, capturing 23 seats. The opposition Center Party took 26 seats, and the Social Democratic Party (SDE) won 19 seats. In August 2011, the parliament reelected President Toomas Hendrik Ilves to a second five-year term. The Reform Party performed poorly in the 2013 municipal elections, while the Center Party, which draws much of its support from Estonia's Russian-speaking population, posted strong results.

Prime Minister Ansip stepped down in March 2014 in order to allow a new head of the Reform Party to establish themselves ahead of 2015 parliamentary elections. A new government coalition headed by Reform's Taavi Rõivas was approved shortly afterward. Prime Minister Rõivas moved to abandon Reform's previous coalition partner, the IRL, in favor of forming an alliance with the Social Democrats.

#### **B. Political Pluralism and Participation: 15 / 16**

Estonia's political parties organize and operate freely, though only citizens may be members. The conservative, pro-business Reform Party has dominated the government since 2007. However, support for the Reform Party declined markedly in recent years in the wake of corruption scandals, and due to Prime Minister Ansip's continued support for EU bailout packages for heavily indebted EU member nations. The left-leaning Center Party draws much of its support from Estonia's Russian-speakers. A new right-wing anticorruption party, the Estonian Free Party, formed in 2014. Its members have expressed support for a tax-free minimum salary, and a lower voting threshold for parties to sit in the parliament.

Only citizens may participate in national elections. As a result, ethnic Russian residents of Estonia whose citizenship remains undetermined—constituting about 6.5 percent of the population—cannot vote in national polls. Resident noncitizens are permitted to vote in local elections, but may not run as candidates.

### **C. Functioning of Government: 12 / 12**

There are occasional problems with government corruption in Estonia. Recent years have seen heavily publicized allegations of money laundering within both the Reform Party and the Center Party, but no criminal convictions have followed. A European Commission (EC) report issued in February said Estonia should improve transparency for party financing and state procurement processes. Top members of the Reform Party, including Environment Minister Keit Pentus-Rosimannus, were implicated in 2013 in the so-called Autorollo case, a corruption case involving a defunct trucking company that had been owned by Pentus-Rosimannus's father. A court in June 2014 acquitted Pentus-Rosimannus, but ruled that her husband and her lawyer would have to pay some of the €580,000 (\$774,000) damage claim the Autorollo bankruptcy committee had levied against them. In May the prosecutor's office opened a criminal investigation into whether the Center Party had improperly used public funds to finance its campaign in 2013 local elections; the case remains open. In June, the office declined to launch an investigation into similar claims against the Reform Party and the IRL.

Recent statistics show that Estonian residents perceive widespread corruption within the country. However, it continues to score highly on Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index, ranking 26 of 175 countries and territories surveyed in the 2014 report. The government involves nongovernmental organizations and ordinary citizens in the drafting of legislation.

### **Civil Liberties: 56 / 60**

### **D. Freedom of Expression and Belief: 16 / 16**

The government generally respects freedom of the press. Public and private television and radio stations operate in Estonia, and there are a number of independent newspapers, including at least one in Russian. The government is planning to launch a new Russian-language television channel. The IRL indicated that it would try to shutter the Russian-language website and newspaper *Stolitsa* after its editor expressed support for the Russian annexation of Crimea, but its efforts were unsuccessful. A 2010 law authorized fines for outlets that disseminate news deemed libelous, as well as for journalists who refuse to reveal sources under certain circumstances. It remains illegal to insult court officials or police officers in connection with their official responsibilities.

Russian media reported in July 2014 that two Russian journalists had been briefly detained at the Tallinn

airport before being sent home; the journalists had attempted to cover a Waffen SS veterans' gathering. According to Russia's RIA Novosti news agency, Estonian officials had indicated that the journalists were denied entry to Estonia because they had tried to enter the country on tourist visas, when they were there to perform work. In December, the pro-Russian journalist Giulietto Chiesa, an Italian citizen, was arrested ahead of a conference at which he was to speak about European-Russian relations, reportedly because he had violated an entry ban. He was soon released.

In 2013, the European Commission referred Estonia to the European Court of Justice on the grounds that the Ministry of Economic Affairs, which regulates Estonia's telecommunication sector, could not also own the largest television and radio broadcast network operator, Levira. In 2014 the government undertook efforts to sell off its shares in Levira.

Religious freedom is respected in law and in practice. A 2011 law mandated that public Russian-language high schools must teach 60 percent of their curriculum in the Estonian language. In 2013, the government rejected a petition from Tallinn's city council to allow four public secondary schools in the city to waive that requirement.

## **E. Associational and Organizational Rights: 12 / 12**

The constitution guarantees freedoms of assembly and association, and the government upholds those rights in practice. Civil society is vibrant. Workers may organize freely, strike, and bargain collectively, although public servants at the municipal and state levels may not strike. The Confederation of Estonian Trade Unions has reported private-sector violations of union rights, including workers threatened with dismissal or pay cuts if they formed unions.

## **F. Rule of Law: 14 / 16**

The judiciary is independent and generally free from government interference. Laws prohibiting arbitrary arrest and detention and ensuring the right to a fair trial are largely observed. The country's prison system continues to suffer from overcrowding and prisoners have poor access to health care. In February 2014, the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) ruled that Estonian officials had violated Andrei Tali's right to be free from inhumane treatment or degradation. The court said prison authorities violated Tali's rights when in 2009 they pepper-sprayed him without warning in a confined space and strapped him to a restraint bed as a punishment. Tali, who is serving a life sentence for a murder conviction, was awarded €5,000 (\$6,700).

## **G. Personal Autonomy and Individual Rights: 14 / 16**

Estonia's constitution allows citizens and noncitizens holding government-issued identity documents to travel inside Estonia and abroad. Though corruption in the business sector is problematic, Estonian residents enjoy a high level of economic freedom.

Violence against women, including domestic violence, remains a problem. Women in Estonia earn on average 30 percent less than men do, which is the largest gap in the European Union. Estonia is a source, transit point, and destination for women trafficked for the purpose of prostitution. Estonia criminalized

human trafficking in 2012.

In October 2014, Estonia's parliament narrowly approved legislation permitting same-sex partnerships. The new law allows two people in a civil union nearly identical rights to those of married couples, but does not allow same-sex partners in a civil union to adopt. It does allow a person to adopt his or her partner's biological child.

### **Scoring Key: X / Y (Z)**

**X = Score Received**

**Y = Best Possible Score**

**Z = Change from Previous Year**

**[Full Methodology](#)**